DRAFT INTRODUCTION (April 2018)

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“Introduction”

Cracking the Code: The Challenge of a Semiotic Sociology

(Book manuscript, currently under contract)

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This is an unedited (read: not proofread by a native speaker) version 1.4 of the introduction to the book on the integration of semiotics and social theory that is currently under contract and that is supposed to be published at the end of 2019 or - more realistically - during 2020. I feel quite safe that *some* of the argument exposed here will make it to the final stage of cutting and re-writing.

This draft is at a preliminary stage and, therefore, immersed in semiosis: it can change, I can change, my ideas can change as well as my wording of my ideas. The introduction itself can disappear into a bang of embarrassment before the deadline for submission. As a working paper, it sets some ideas while others are still floating.

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Introduction

The main motivation behind this book is the need to address the uneasy state of the relationship between sociology and semiotics. This relationship can be qualified in many ways, but my words of choice are “ambivalent”, sometimes “frustrating”, and yet overall “exciting”. I choose these terms because, in spite of the central position that “semiotic” - both as a noun and as an adjective - has held and still holds within crucial areas of sociology like general theory and cultural sociology (which will be the two fields in whose turf this book moves), it is still very hard to write about a possible, fruitful integration of the two disciplines in the direction of a rigorous “semiotic sociology”. Especially when, for a long time, semiotics has been denounced for its “intellectual bankruptcy” (Sperber and Wilson 1986), and when even prominent practitioners of semiotics have often denounced its imperialism and the discipline’s tendency to claim jurisdiction on the traditional subject matter of other disciplines. On its part, sociology does not seem to fare much better, particularly in times when theory is perceived as progressively useless and cultural sociology is often denounced as “sentimental” and exaggeratedly reflexive (Gans 2012).

Indeed, despite optimistic tones that portray semiotics and sociology as comprehensive efforts that aim at reaching an understanding of crucial aspects of social life (as clear in their respective missions, the understanding of the possibility of communication and the understanding of the possibility of social order), their integration has been more a tentative than a real achievement. Behind the difficulties lie very serious intellectual and conceptual reasons, which have affected the very task of imagining a path toward integration. Currents of thought are winding, concepts get appropriated, translated, and betrayed (as per the Italian motto: *traduttore, traditore* - translator, traitor), and the uses of semiotics (particularly within sociology) seem to colonize a very big space where the most vertiginous heights of general theory and the most trivial applications of the usual toolkit of semiotic concepts to ill-designed case studies both reside.

Such a proliferation of tasks is in line with what Umberto Eco (1984, 4-8) identified as the three different levels at which semiotics is relevant, empirically and theoretically, and at which it is usually performed. For Eco, semiotics tends to operate at an “applied” level, at the level of the definition of the grammar and rules of “specific” semiotic systems, and at a more

general and comprehensive level where general semiotics attends to explicit philosophical questions. The first and the second levels are the ones that we meet more commonly within sociology, while the third is sighted only rarely and at a distance, even within subfields that would be in principle more receptive to the possibility of incorporating it, and where general social theory and general semiotics should asymptotically tend to reach each other.

With regards to the first of these three levels, the one where we witness the applications of single semiotic concepts (or clusters of concepts), the success of semiotics as a discipline has been enormous and - I dare say - well deserved; its penetration in the traditional turf of social science has proven extremely fruitful not only from semiotics' point of view, but also for the benefits that it has brought to the social scientists involved in the tides of the cultural turn that have been rising since the 1970s. On the ground of Clifford Geertz's famous statement about culture as essentially a semiotic concept (Geertz 1973), we - as social scientists - have happily seized the opportunity to think of culture in terms of a very diverse set yet recognizable common language: signifier and signified, signs, interpretants, narrative, actant, signification and communication, code and message, structure, and in the process we have also imported ideas that are compatible with this vision of the centrality of language and meaning, from Ludwig Wittgenstein's theories of meaning as use, or John Austin's and John Searle's speech acts.

Most of the semiotics we use as sociologists is performed at this very basic level, the one in which we apply exotic concepts to address traditional sociological issues as well as all the puzzles generated by our case studies. From this perspective, semiotics is located in the research process and it serves a crucial function, that of being part of our methodological and technical set of tools, something that we use in the context of the processes of description of bounded social phenomena: rituals, images, speech and discourse, kinship, power, the flow of social life itself. The second level, that of specific semiotics, is more challenging, theoretically as well as conceptually. It is the level where, armed with our sociological background, we try to act as semioticians in disguise, and aim at the description of "a given field of communicative phenomena as ruled by a system of signification" (Eco 1984, 5). Work performed at these two levels has produced remarkable advancements, and sociologists who have situated themselves and their work as a rigorous application of semiotics concepts, or have investigated the possibility of approaching the description and the conditions that are

conducive to communication, have certainly enriched the discipline and their respective subfields.

The trouble starts when we move to the third, more general, and more challenging level. The one where semiotic issues are also philosophical issues about the nature of meaning, of belief, language, and - more broadly - of the interface between man and world. They simply do not coincide, and if they do they overlap only partially with the key sociological issues that are, in their own terms, also philosophical issues. These usually take the form of familiar binaries: order and change, structure and agency, system and process, macro and micro. Since we - as social scientists - have been very busy fleshing them out for the better part of nearly two centuries, we have developed a somewhat precise understanding of the centrality of those questions, as well as a recognizable set of concepts and arguments intended to furnish, if not the solutions, at least a set of new problems and angles from where to address them. In this context, semiotics operates in an ambiguous way: in the face of the general issues of social theory, it is sometimes dismissed altogether, as an obstacle rather than as an aid; other times, it is relegated in an ancillary position and it can at best provide established signifiers for sociological theorizing, wrapping with new words what, in the end, remain recognizable as sociological concepts, created and reproduced by sociologists; finally, and in the rarest of cases, its centrality is not simply evoked but also practiced, and, depending on one's fluency in semiotics, some degree of integration (cross- and inter-disciplinary) is achieved.

Most of the times, however, such a kind of interdisciplinary penetration falls short on its promise. As sociologists, we end up working with our own image of semiotics, which is far and distant from the one that is commonly in place in the discipline with which we aim to make contact.

For those who study the process of disciplinary formation and consolidation, such a picture is a familiar one. Two processes seem particularly important on this matter, the first being the internal dynamics of disciplines, while the second being the working representations that a discipline constructs about the others that surround it when it incorporates external ideas into some of its frameworks.

In *Chaos of Disciplines*, Andrew Abbott argues that the major distinction that operates within the intellectual space (in his case, the space of sociology) is above all a *methodological one*: quantitative and qualitative approaches represent the two poles of a

tension that involves the proximity of sociology to the normative, regulative ideals of science and the humanities. This distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods is reproduced at more specific levels, in a “fractal” way, so that the distinction is played out not only at the higher levels, but also at the level of relevant subfields or sub-disciplines. While Abbott’s example is history, from which he draws the conclusions that some areas, like social science history and historical sociology, may have more in common with each other than with the larger parent disciplines within which they are embedded, the example of cultural sociology can describe in a more accurate way the space of semiotics as recognized within the boundaries of our discipline.

The study of culture is often perceived as eminently non-quantitative, and yet the distinction between a “cultural sociology” and a “sociology of culture” is often evoked (Alexander 2003) to differentiate not only between institutionalist approaches and those that rely on the idea of cultural autonomy, but also in the different methods that they adopt. At a more specific level, however, one can operate a further distinction according to a fractal principle, this time within cultural sociology. Some approaches are distinctly interpretive (like Jeffrey Alexander’s “strong program” in cultural theory), while others - which still proclaim to adopt a semiotic approach, like Eviatar Zerubavel’s cognitive sociology - have a greater degree of formalization (Cerulo). It is at this particular level that things start to get interesting, because a further fractal distinction identifies two spaces for semiotics, one focused on a more explicit formalization of cultural autonomy (and which, therefore, insists on a difference from an hermeneutical cultural sociology), and one characterized by a more pronounced interpretive sensitivity within cognitive sociology. Yet, the distinction is not methodological, and it is focused on a more theoretically-centered distinction between *interpretivism* and *formalism* that is central to social theory (Lemert 1979).

Not surprisingly, there are attempts to produce a synthesis able to link those fractures, like Jeffrey Alexander’s “structural hermeneutics” or the composite neo-Peircean movement in theory construction (which I take as an attempt to produce a more formalized semiotics). Yet, I think this is the sector of the intellectual space where the integration between semiotics and sociology plays itself out. And, if it could seem that it represents a marginal space limited to a quite unpopular subfield (at least from the point of view of “mainstream” sociology, whatever that means), it must also be noted that this is a very lively space where substantial

sociological theory is produced.

Abbott's and Lemert's works are useful to define both a principle of differentiation, and a description of how it is played out in the cultural history of disciplines. On his part, Omar Lizardo (2014) evokes the idea that sociologists often create "subdisciplinary avatars", images of other disciplines that are established "by sociologists for sociological consumption" (2014, 985), meaning that practices, methods, ideas and approaches are reworked to fit the interests and the language of a particular intellectual community, an interesting way of practicing a largely *intradisciplinary* form of interdisciplinarity while being largely resistant to dialogue with the discipline from where we have imported our ideas.

The fate of the relationship between semiotics and sociology seems aptly described by Lizardo's idea that we work according to a "Comtean schema", considering sociology as a meta-field legitimized to incorporate all disciplines that, broadly, have something to do with the social or the cultural. It takes two to tango, though, and semiotics has often done its part willingly, accused by its own practitioners of certain imperialistic attitude vis a vis other disciplines. Indeed, while there is not an avatar that could be unmistakably described as pushing toward a "semiotic" sociology (although the label itself has been sometimes proposed: see Rochberg-Halton 1982, Heiskala 2003, 2014), within the broad domain of semiotics we find plenty: cultural semiotics (Lorusso 2014, Posner 2003, Torop 1999), social semiotics, socio-semiotics, the semiotics of culture, and the like.

There is, in fact, a strange asymmetry. On one hand, sociology has incorporated ideas of semiotics but it has done so either under broad theoretical perspectives (such as symbolic interactionism), or under the banner of subfields such as sociological theory or cultural sociology; either way, it seems that it has provided concepts and methods of analysis, rather than offering radical departures from what sociologists have traditionally done for over a century. On the other, the proliferation of avatars is a clear signal of semiotics' attempt to colonize the turf of other disciplines. In doing so, however, its practitioners have often overlooked both the contribution and the innovations coming from sociology (they have paid more careful attention to anthropology), or broadly from the social sciences. When it goes "social" or "cultural", semiotics is more interested in the analysis of social artifacts or texts, than it is in the process of social life in its sociality and not just in its textuality, and only in

rare instances it approaches - albeit almost asymptotically - the core questions that constitute sociology as a discipline.

In part, this comes as a consequence of the divide between science and the humanities that has simultaneously separated semiotics and sociology, and created within their respective disciplinary space, a tension between science and the humanities, and more specifically between formalism and interpretivism. Both disciplines, indeed, inhabit the intellectual space of a “third culture”, as Wolf Lepenies described this liminal space between science and the humanities (Lepenies 1988), but they do so without careful or explicit appreciation that they are simultaneously a “quasi science” and a “quasi humanities” (Zald 1991).

If sociology has often dreamed about being a “science”, producing a self-representation that avoided its specificity as a *social* science where teleological attitudes, scientific optimism, and humanistic questions cohabit, semiotics was often happy to subscribe to that vision, claiming an autonomous space where a quasi-humanistic analysis of the social could be pursued. Perhaps, the most relevant distinction on this aspect - one crucial in the definition of the intellectual space at the crossroads between semiotics and sociology - was the one proposed famously by Roland Barthes, who raised the question of the distinction between a more semiotically informed “socio-logic”, and the more traditional, science-like, methods and outlook of sociology. Barthes’, indeed, was an attempt at christening a discipline or a sub-discipline, and not surprisingly he did that by establishing differences and oppositions. Sociology, his strawman, was in itself a conservative discipline in epistemological as well as in broadly political terms. Ironically, he perceived sociology as a science that dealt with “content” and institutions, while his more semiological socio-logic was interested in the first instance with forms and abstractions. Within the customary distinction between the two planes generally approached by semiotics (and linguistics), form and content, socio-logic and sociology had a different subject matter and were therefore largely complementary.

The difference was foundational, that between the understanding or explication of content, and the description of form and of the generative processes that connected the multifarious forms of social significance, giving rise to a clash between formalism and interpretivism that could be solved, if not synthesized, by the mobilization of semiotics at the levels of both sociological theory and meta-theory (Lemert 1979, in particular). Indeed, modern semiotics has developed since its inception in the context of such a tension, which

sometimes has been understood in terms of the irreducibility between the tradition of semiology that originates with Ferdinand de Saussure, and the more pragmatist “semiotic” called for by the most irksome of philosophers, Charles Sanders Peirce.

Each of these traditions has been variously interpreted and used within sociology, in part aligning with, and sometimes driving, the exacerbation of the opposition between formalism and interpretivism. Nor the attempts to define a synthesis from within sociology’s avatar of semiotics have contributed to make things clearer. In fact, sociologists have often produced an asymmetric translation of the fracture between the two semiotic traditions to the point that, as Charles Lemert has argued,

[Quote]

Where sociologists have taken an interest in classical semiotics, they have tended to select such binary concepts of meaning as signifier/signified, speech/language, or performance/competence

[End quote]

In doing so, they have also created a hierarchy within each binary (in this case, a hierarchy centered on the relevance of the signified, of language, of competence), because it seemingly enabled them to place culture (in the form of cultural or meaning structures) at the same explanatory level of social structures, making abstraction and generalization possible and thereby having - seemingly but mistakenly - more leverage in the production of what John Levi Martin has identified as theory “in the third person” (Martin 2011). Semiotics, in turn, also went a long way toward the definition of a third-person, systematic palace, to the point that it - particularly in the tradition of structuralist semiotics - eschewed pragmatics and brought any consideration of the first person (a prominent sociosemiotic theme in the Peircean tradition, where it is supplemented by the dimension of dialogue) under the more reassuring safety net of textuality, where action could be understood as embedded in a *textualized* system of action or could be analyzed, as Paul Ricoeur famously claimed, as a “text”, insofar as it was “meaningful” (Ricoeur 1971).

Indeed, in both disciplines - the more so as they came into reciprocal contact during the cultural turn - analogies proliferated. Social life is a text to be decoded; it has a deep grammar

that has to be unveiled; messages have to be reined in by the discovery of codes, and codes themselves at some point have to be cracked. These analogies seemed to provide a common ground to all the disciplines that wanted to confront them, but in the end they worked only insofar as they were transformed by intra-disciplinary practices and contexts, in other words, as avatars. In the long run, what started as the promise of convergence turned into a progressive farewell. Semioticians often seem to have a fragmentary notion of social theory and of the way we practice the sociology of culture (and if they want to turn to somebody in the social sciences they usually turn to anthropology, or they cherry-pick somebody who seem in line with their pretensions to define social science from the outside); in turn, sociologists have become accustomed to use a very basic, workable set of ideas about semiotics (and semiosis) carefully selected from Saussure, Peirce, Barthes (the great intellectual mediator), and a handful of other figures.

What I try to accomplish in this book is to try to challenge this state of affairs, either through the exegetical brute force of pushing the sociological uses of semiotics against the wall of what semiotics seems to be *really* about, or through a more moderate effort aimed at synthesis and theory construction. The point is: what kind of theory and what kind of criticism?

I think it is safe to start with the declaration that I am not trying to achieve, or indicate, any kind of new “turn”. There is no “semiotic turn” to push for, since I believe it has happened in the past, and the fact that it has not been to my eyes a successful one should not hide its merits. We have had, indeed, an epistemological turn; a linguistic turn; a cultural turn; an interpretive turn; a practice turn; a performative turn; and, just recently, an iconic turn. So many turns, indeed, that we have spent the better part of the past forty years whirling like dervishes and there are no signs that the flood of turns is going to stop anytime soon. Many of these turns - even when they had some substantial reason for turning and were not a mere marketing move to define some intellectual territory - required at least some consideration for semiotics, for the problems it poses and for its fragile solutions. Let us say, for the sake of clarity and conciseness, that I place this book within the broader “cultural turn” in the social sciences and the humanities, which itself presupposes the effectiveness of the “linguistic” turn and the usefulness of a very fuzzy orientation that is “interpretive” social science. Within this broad landscape, I take the problem of meaning to be central, that to investigate meaning

requires some understanding of how culture plays a role in the definition (and to some extent determination) of action, and that this culture-action nexus is an unavoidable component of sociological explanation.

That said, it is quite clear that the point of departure is what I will more explicitly identify as the limitations of the traditional model of the general framework of action that we find in a long line of descent that goes from Parsons to many contemporary cultural sociologists *cum* social theorists, who have been painstakingly tried to solve or avoid Parsons' conundrum: that culture (and the cultural system) is a necessary component of any action framework, but that culture *per se* is not involved concretely in the process of action.

I think this is the crucial point where semiotics is both a curse and a blessing. Semiotics is useful to fill our sociological notion of the cultural system with a mechanism of its internal operations (as Parsons himself was well aware) and yet the type of semiotics we mobilize can also prevent us from bridging the gap between analytic descriptions of the internal operations of culture, and the concrete unfolding of culture within situations, circumstances, and acts. This represents the point from where everyone who is involved in the definition of a cultural sociology takes off, and this is the point where semiotics can be most effectively used to furnish a kind of sociological explanation that does not put what Isaac Reed (2012) has effectively identified as "landscapes of meaning" into an ancillary role, but front and center as the crux of explanation.

Even the most explicit attempts to sociologize the potential of semiotics for this type of explanation have been, alternatively, flawed and irritating, the more so the more they appropriated semiotic jargon in a succession of carefree arguments. Some do not stand an aggressive dissection of their internal logic (and we shall see, in some chapters, that in the end they have no space for meaning and therefore for semiotics at all); others desperately attempt to rescue the ideas of structuralism because they are trapped in the equivocal dualism between supposed social structures and supposed cultural structures; others, finally, rely on unnoticed fallacies that make our understanding of crucial aspects of both semiotics and semiosis puzzling.

If this is the set of problems that we face internally (within the rather loose coalitions of scholars who nonetheless appeal to the intellectual worthiness of semiotic arguments) then facing criticism from the outside, from fellow sociologists who are wary of the limitations of

a semiotic approach and prefer to reign it in within the more controllable framework of a philosophy of mind, of a cognitive psychology, or - worse - some kind of reductionism (including individualistic reductionism that sweeps away the problem of structures as an antecedent), is a lost battle. However, it is the potentiality of semiotics (and a particular type of semiotic that I have in mind) that makes room for a last minute victory, although one needs to make some intellectual choices in order to achieve it.

Luckily enough, and probably as an unintended consequence of a shift that has occurred in sociological theory and in cultural sociology over the last decade or so, the semiotics we can mobilize is the one that is often evoked by our critics, and at least the debate can be pursued on common conceptual and epistemological ground. Over the past decade, the pendulum of relevance swung in favor not of the neo-structuralist approaches that have done to cultural sociological theory more harm than good, but in favor of the “other” tradition of modern semiotics (call it interpretive or pragmatist) that once had as its champion and initiator an eclectic philosopher and polymath like Charles Sanders Peirce. It is a very pragmatist, sometimes problematic, reading of Peirce and pragmatism, but it’s there, and one of the objectives of a semiotic sociology should be to rescue Peirce’s problematic and complex thinking from the reduction to basic terms (sign-object-interpretant; symbol-index-icon) that represents seemingly his only legacy within sociology.

In recent years, indeed, Peirce has influenced several proposals in what has been labeled (somehow optimistically) the “new theorizing movement” (Lizardo 2015, 16). An explicit framework derived from Peirce’s theory of inquiry is at the center of Richard Swedberg’s reflection on the practice and procedures of theory construction (Swedberg 2017). Neil Gross, in offering a pragmatist understanding of how social mechanisms can be effectively specified, has turned to Peirce’s categories (Gross 2009). Iddo Tavory and Stephan Timmermans (2012) have introduced Peirce’s idea of abduction in the context of a long-overdue methodological and epistemological debate, about how we can theorize in qualitative research and, above all, in ethnography.

In the always vital subfield of cultural sociology, there have been moves in the direction of network semantics (in itself strongly influenced by Peircean intuitions) as a means to overcome the hardships we face when we subscribe to neo-structural versions of cultural autonomy (Cossu 2011, 2017, Norton 2018). On a more explicit epistemological note, Isaac

Reed's *Interpretation and Social Knowledge* (2012) has called for a "massive transformation" of the way we produce sociological explanation by evoking some version of Peirce's triadic notion of semiosis as the interaction of a sign, an object, and an interpretant. Outside the disciplinary boundaries of sociology, the linguistic anthropologist Paul Kockelman has built a complex theory of agency and ontology (Kockelman 2012) that centers on the idea of "semiotic stance" (Kockelman 2006), and he has recently investigated the role of interpretation (understood as a very Peircean process involving "thirds") in the age of automatic computation (Kockelman 2017).

This neo-Peircean sensitivity is not yet an intellectual movement, nor perhaps it is desirable that it becomes one. But it is interesting to notice how scholars coming from all walks of academic life and disciplinary backgrounds are trying to reformulate foundational questions at the intersection of their respective, social scientific disciplines in such a way that several, different aspects of Peirce's highly philosophical arguments (his theory of inquiry, the logic of abduction, his theory of semiosis, or his categories) function as convenient starting points.

They are convenient starting points because a neo-Peircean sensibility dissolves many of the flawed arguments produced by our lay use of semiotics, and also many of the counterarguments advanced by the critics of semiotic approaches within cultural sociology. In other words, it allows us to say that critics of semiotics are right, but that they commit a fundamental mistake in picking up a very selective notion of semiotics - almost invariably limited to a positivistic distinction among syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Morris 1938, 1946), and - within this distinction- to an understanding of culture as the object of a syntactic and semantic description.

It is with particular reference to some of Peirce's seminal ideas that on the process of semiosis that the framework of a semiotic sociology can be rebuilt from the ground up, while also avoiding the dead-ends of our (much too) structuralist orientation. If there is such thing as a culture structure, if we can speak of such a thing like the organization of culture as a web of significance, the format is a neo-Peircean one, and it alone can provide semiotic rigor and room for sociological explanation.

The adoption of such a framework seems particularly pressing - in the local economy of this book - because it plays the double role of furnishing solutions and dissolving dilemmas

about the role of culture in action, and about the organization of culture. Some questions, indeed, make more sense if we bring Peirce back in, if we bring back in the tradition of semiotics that his work embodies, and we happily dispose of any dream of ontological structuralism that is implied, but never demonstrated, in many of our structural-determinist discussions of culture. These discussions are tiresome, and misplaced most of the times.

OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS FOLLOWS

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